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FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN STUDENTS' WRITINGS

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Writers of freshman composition textbooks and theorists on language and rhetoric differ in many ways, but especially great is the difference in their approach to figures of speech. Freshman textbooks rarely stress figurative language and usually teach stu-

dents little about how to employ these devices. According to a study of one hundred freshman college textbooks published between 1975 and 1985, the four figures most frequently mentioned are parallelism, metaphor, simile, and analogy (Devet 96-104).¹ In general, these freshman composition textbooks teach students that they can use these figures for well-constructed sentences, proper diction, and colorful descriptions. As a result, the students' writing will acquire "vividness" (Canavan 211)² and "force" (Hacker 111).³

Most twentieth-century theorists and rhetoricians, however, emphasize that figures are integral to language and persuasive in discourse. Richard Weaver, for example, explains that metaphor underlies language itself: "Many words which we think of as prosaic literalisms can be shown to have their origin in long-forgotten comparisons. [For instance], the word 'depend' analogizes the action of hanging from; 'contact' analogizes a relationship. . . ." (205-06). J. Hillis Miller characterizes metaphors as central to the act of reading and writing: "Metaphors are not like the racing turn. They are the universal medium in which the writer - novice, intermediate, and advanced - must learn to swim" (54). Kenneth Burke also recognizes the vital nature of tropes and schemes. In *A Grammar of Motives* he cites metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony as ways to distinguish between scientific and poetic realism (503-517), while in *A Rhetoric of Motives* Burke implies that schemes are the underlying pattern of all speech: "You can't possibly make a statement without its falling into some sort of pattern" (65). Besides stressing that figures are innate to language, theorists discuss the rhetorical nature of schemes and tropes. Burke says that "many purely formal patterns [like antithesis and climax] can readily awaken an attitude of collaborative expectancy in us" (*Rhetoric of Motives* 58). Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca indicate that schemes and tropes are integral to the subject, speaker, and audience of a discourse. In *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* Sister Miriam Joseph demonstrates that figures of speech are linked to "thought, emotion, and expression" (398), while in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* Edward P. J. Corbett explains that figures are related to the *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* of a discourse (459). Hence, among modern theorists there is a sense that figures are vital to expression.

Composition instructors, therefore, find themselves torn between two positions. Their textbooks give little specific advice on the role of figures in discourse, while the theorists extol the virtues of schemes and tropes. Such a gap between textbooks and theorists is, in fact, largely unnecessary. If instructors examine the writings of students, they can discover how these writers employ figures and how figures can be taught.

How have students used figures of speech? With little priming,⁴ students have shown that figurative language can be used to amplify or summarize a subject. Figures also structure a discourse by pivoting ideas in a paragraph, establishing coherence between sentences, acting as transitions between paragraphs, and setting up contrasts. In short, figures of speech may be studied as more than "colorful descriptors." Schemes and tropes can play vital, specific roles in the writings of freshmen.

One of the functions of figures is to amplify a topic. This function is aptly illustrated by the examples which follow.

To open her essay, a student uses anaphora, or repetition, at the beginning of successive sentences or clauses, in order to explain that teenagers are curious about sex:

It seems that high school students are more curious about sex than about any other topic. They would prefer knowing the time it takes to conceive a baby rather than know-

ing the distance between two points. They would prefer knowing the cause of most sexually transmitted diseases than knowing the cause of the Revolutionary War. . . . (Thias Crawford, argument, no title, out-of-class, 16 November 1984).⁵

Antithesis can also amplify a topic as in the following, where the writer explains how Bruce Catton's essay on Grant and Lee is very different from Jennifer McBride's on the popularity of rock stars:

In conclusion, I feel the essays are a world apart. Catton exalts his characters, while McBride stereotypes and belittles; one essay encourages heroism, while the other discourages it (Jimmy Crosby, essay exam, no title, in-class, 29 October 1984).

Anadiplosis, or "repetition of the last word of one line or clause to begin the next" (Lanham 7), can elaborate on a previous sentence as here, where a writer explains how a stockbroker has "sacrificed":

She [the female stockbroker] has sacrificed. She explained how being an adult can bring on responsibility, how responsibility demands compromise, and how compromise is, in reality, a sacrifice. (Thias Crawford, interview essay, no title, out-of-class, 26 October 1984).

Antimetabole, or "inverting the order of repeated words" (Lanham 10), can also amplify a topic as in the following, where the writer explains his topic sentence:

Learning and knowledge are very important to each other. Learning leads to knowledge and knowledge provokes learning. . . . (John Skinner, essay exam, no title, in-class, 29 October 1984).

Of course, figures help a writer to summarize his topic. In the following paragraph, a student explains the origin of video games by using personification which, in turn, becomes an allegory:

The video game first appeared in the late seventies with games such as Space Invaders, Asteroids, Galaxian, to name a few. The mother of the video game would have to be the now antique pinball machine, which came out in the late fifties and still holds its own today. . . . The father of the video game, the silicon chip, was the component to make the video game. By putting these two together, these parents formed the fad, the video game (Tony Williams, cause-effect, no title, in-class, 14 October 1983).

Personification also summarizes as in this opening, where the student writes a graphic personification to embody the alcoholic problem he has found on campus:

The University has a hangover. I'm not referring to the edge of a roof on one of its buildings, but to a large portion of the student body who indulge in . . . too much alcohol . . . (David Swindler, cause-effect, "U.S.C.'s Drinking Problem," 14 October 1983).

Structuring discourse is another way students may use figures of speech. To turn or pivot readers from one idea to another in a paragraph, a writer can use the figure polysyndeton (repetition of connectives between phrases or clauses). In the following a student uses polysyndeton to shift the discussion from one radio station to another:

. . . WWDM tends to get terribly boring with news reports. Ten minutes of every hour is spent giving reports on what's going on. Between the news and commercials, there's hardly time to entertain us with what we want to hear. WDPM, on the other hand, maintains a stable balance between news and ads and music. . . . (Thias Crawford, comparison-contrast, no title, in-class, 5 October 1984).

Figures may work together to pivot ideas. When discussing different kinds of guests on television talk shows, a writer uses both alliteration and antithesis to shift his paragraph:

. . . This big chance . . . seems to be more a big disaster because the rookie comedian is now transformed from a local loser to a national nobody. The rookie comedian is usually in the mold of another famous comedian and lacks originality more than talent. One has to sympathize with a guy who gets laughed at because of his lack of humor (James Eaton, classification, "The Terror of Talk Shows," out-of-class, 26 September 1983).

Another way to structure a discourse is to rename ideas in order to establish coherence between sentences. Metaphor, alliteration, and simile function in this manner. In the following the writer uses the metaphor "nectar of the devil" to rename "drink":

Besides the large variety of people and organizations that promote the use of alcohol, there are also many places within walking distance . . . [where] students may go to get a drink. Most students reserve their drinking for weekends, but there are some hardcores [who] go out almost every night of the week seeking the nectar of the devil (Phil Haven, revision for cause-effect, "Night Owls," out-of-class, 29 October 1983).

An alliterative phrase may also serve as a device for coherence as in this example, where the alliteration is a synonym for "bottle opener":

. . . Imported beers, however, require the assistance of a bottle opener. Without this tool of the trade, one would be out of a good buzz (Tony Williams, classification, "Bottled Beers and Canny Cans," out-of-class, 26 September 1983).

A last example of a figure creating coherence can be found in the following, where the author uses a simile as a synonym for the "priceless" information students learn in a sex education class:

. . . These uninformed kids deserve to know and should take sex education courses. Also, although the books and instructors' salaries may appear to be too expensive, I feel that the information the child would acquire is priceless. Just like gold, this education will last a lifetime (Thias Crawford, revision for argument, no title, out-of-class, 26 November 1984).

Besides pivoting ideas and establishing coherence, figures may function as transitions between paragraphs. For example, in an essay on why alcoholic consumption is increasing, a writer has just finished explaining that a student's pals and social group prompt one to overindulge. Then, to start his next body paragraph, the writer uses alliteration:

It may seem that with friends and fraternities trying to entice the student into the snare of alcohol, this would be

enough, but it's not (Phil Haven, revision of cause-effect, "Night Owls," out-of-class, 29 October 1983).

Metaphor may also act as a transition between paragraphs. When describing his pet dog and cat, a student ends one paragraph with the image of gladiators and starts his next paragraph by continuing the metaphor:

. . . Finally, the two tired gladiators will retreat behind their lines, Tippy [the dog] to his favorite chair in the dining room and Boo [the cat] to her comfortable bed in my grandmother's bedroom.

After the two combatants have rested, they usually come out of hiding to get a bit to eat. . . . (Jimmy Crosby, comparison-contrast, "Cats and Dogs," in-class, 5 October 1984).

A final way that figures of speech may structure a discourse is by setting up contrasts which the writer bounces off to establish the focus of his paper. Personification functions effectively for setting up these contrasts. For instance, when writing about whether the United States should impose restrictions on the importation and sale of foreign cars, a writer uses personification in his topic sentence:

One argument against such restrictions is the United States is slamming the door in the face of open competition and free enterprise. This is not so (Trey Arrington, final exam, no title, in-class, 7 December 1984).

Anaphora also sets up contrasts as this student writer shows in the conclusion of his essay:

Although I realize that I am not a doctor, that I am not a psychologist, and that I am not an authority on the subject [of birth control], the advice I have given is advice I would feel safe giving to my own sister, whom I love very much and care for deeply (Kevin DeLoache, revision of argument, "An Ounce of Prevention," out-of-class, 30 November 1983).

Of course, there will be objections to teaching figures of speech. Some may argue that such instruction encourages elaborate writing, writing which is empty or which is only "fancy dancing." Some may also argue that students will merely attach figures to their discourse like adding "cherries to the icing on a cake."

But a knowledge of figures does not necessarily foster "fine" writing. One can find students using figures naturally in their compositions. Instructors of writing can re-enforce this behavior by stressing the functions which figurative language performs. Moreover, studying the functions of the figures teaches writers linguistic options. As Arthur Quinn, professor of rhetoric at the University of California-Berkeley, has written,

A writer who is going to use a conjunction and then begins to think about omitting it, or using more than one, will not find the choice made for him by his knowledge of the figures. The figures have done their work when they have made richer the choices he perceives. It [studying figurative expressions] enhances his freedom, and thereby invites him to reflect more deeply on why *he* is writing (24).

Certainly, the writings of students illustrate many linguistic choices which include using figurative language to elaborate, to condense, and to structure. Hence, the students' work indicates that the seeds of rhetorical *flores* are already present. To make

these "flowers" grow, textbook writers could move closer to actual usage and teach more schemes and tropes.

ENDNOTES

¹Parallelism was cited by 81 textbooks, metaphor by 64, simile by 57, and analogy by 52. Next in order of appearance were the following: personification was directly named by 37 textbooks; alliteration by 23 texts; hyperbole by 17; periodical sentence by 15; rhetorical questions by 14; antithesis by 13; allusion by 10. Other figures of speech appeared in fewer than 10 texts: synecdoche and metonymy in 9 texts each; puns and irony in 8; assonance in 7; climax in 6; litotes in 5; oxymoron and onomatopoeia in 4 texts each; periphrasis in 3; anaphora, consonance and asyndeton in 2 texts each; allegory, anadiplosis, antimetabole, epanalipsis, epistrophe, meiosis, paratactic, polyptoton, polysyndeton, and syllepsis in 1 textbook each.

²Besides Canavan, other textbook writers who said figures add "vividness" were Diana Hacker and Betty Renshaw (*A Practical Guide for Writers* 192-194) and Jim W. Corder and John J. Ruszkiewicz (*Handbook of Current English* 559).

³"Force" was also called "vigor" by textbook writers. See Dean Memering and Frank O'Hare (*The Writer's Work* 265).

⁴In freshman English classes, I taught the students only the name and definition of each figure and then gave examples to illustrate the figure itself. I also suggested they try to use figures in titles, introductions, and conclusions.

⁵All the students' quotations are used with the kind permission of the authors.

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